



Play close to the gain line to beat any defence

By **Mike Penistone**,
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Too many attacks are dictated by what the defence is doing. Beat the drift and blitz by playing the ball closer to the gain line and avoiding the deep passing plays behind the front line. Here's my manifesto to bring back shape in attack...

FOCUS

Attack the defence by playing closer to the gain line – it just needs simple skills executed at pace

Key factors

1. Tactically you can kick over or through a rush defence or smash the gain line.
2. By using passing and support near the gain line, you can create space and line breaks.
3. Work on core skills like realignment, running lines, loops and switches.

Key take aways

1. Plays that move the ball behind the first line of attack suit both drift and blitz defences, and make support harder.
2. The ball carrier must engage the defence. Switch late, so near to the defensive line.
3. Use simple skills together to create even more attacking options.

This year's Six Nations again highlighted the difference between the close-to-the-line attack of southern hemisphere teams and the deep-lying attack of their northern hemisphere counterparts. Having coached in the southern hemisphere now for seven years, it's clear that the more effective and entertaining attacking rugby emanates from Down Under, and in particular New Zealand. Why is this so?

In the northern

hemisphere the drift defence is now controlling the attack. It would appear that very few teams look at different ways in which to attack the drift. This problem is compounded by the tactics used against the two other defensive systems, one where the outside defenders come up quickly to corral the attackers into midfield and prevent them attacking on the outside of 13, and the rush defence which maximises pressure on the opposition attack and

hopes to force a mistake.

To combat all these systems there's an overuse of second-man plays, which sees the ball being passed 10 or 15 metres behind the next receiver to an attacker running across the field, trying to attack in the channel outside 13. The drift defence can now operate over the advantage line with the same result as before. Plus, any supporting attacking players have to run backwards and across the field first in support of the ball.

So what should an attack do?

There are several tactical options...

1 Chip the rush

Against England in Paris, France used clever little chip overs or grubber kicks through the rush defence, and one such grubber kick produced a try.

A rushing defence will find it hard to stop, turn and get back in position to defend these types of kick. This French ploy caused England to change this defensive approach at half time.



Jamie Roberts is an ideal player to use on the gain line

2 Smash the gain line

Attackers who can play and penetrate at the advantage line, in the face of the defensive line, are first on the team sheet. Two examples are Jamie Roberts of Wales and Ma'a Nonu of New Zealand.

Roberts's try last year in the third Lions Test in Sydney and his more recent one against Italy validate my point. Nonu does it week in week out, at both provincial and international level. Both players create great support lines for team-mates.

Ask any forward in world rugby which direction he would like to run to be in support of the ball and it won't be backwards.

3 Simple skills

However, you can still go back to simple skills executed at pace and accurately to be effective against both the drift and the "out to in" defence.

• Individual skill

The unpredictability of individual skill makes it a potent attacking weapon and is a line breaker. Are your players practising acceleration/deceleration, sidesteps and swerves? Can they be agile in a confined space? Do they get off the ground quickly? Can they transfer the ball from one arm to the other quickly while performing all the above skills? Do your players run forward first, parallel to the touchline? Do they stand facing the opposing try line when they receive a pass?

Next time you watch a game, look for the player who runs with the ball in both hands and moves it

around as he runs, without releasing it – opposition defenders become mesmerised by it. Look to make your players energised, quick to realign and hungry for the ball (see practice A).

• Unders and overs lines

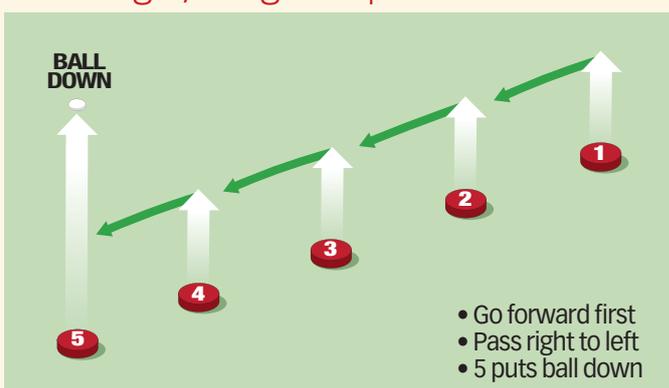
Coaches in the northern hemisphere can talk about these running lines, but I seldom see practices to promote both the running technique and the understanding. Both unders and overs runs can be very effective when performed close to the defensive line, but an effective unders line needs to engage the defender first.

When running an unders line, you start by running forward, then angle in to receive the pass. The defender has little time to adjust, both as an individual and as part of a defensive unit. An effective unders run can get the ball-carrying attacker into the heart of a drift defence and enable his support runners on the inside to run forward first. Nonu creates so many good support lines for the All Black back rowers by running unders lines (see practice B).

• Loops

Loops are effective when the outside defenders come up quickly. It's important when executing a loop that the receiver of the pass runs back under (behind) and gets in front of the looping player before he gives the ball back to him. This will create space for the looping player to run onto the ball and *accelerate* into a gap or exploit any flaw in the defensive line (practice C)

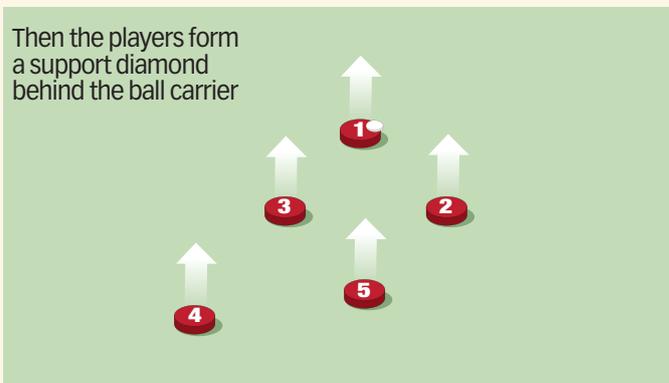
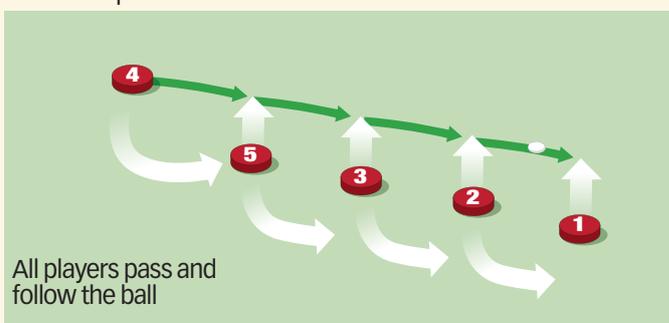
Practice A Pass, support, run straight, realign... at pace



Key points

- 5 must get into position quickly and face forward and go forward first
- 3, 2 and 1 realign immediately

Develop



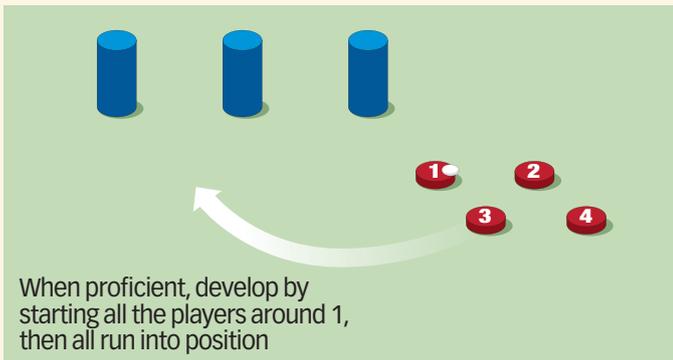
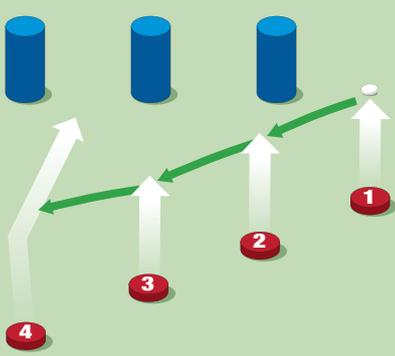
Key points

- 2 and 3 can receive a pass
- 5 can go in on the ball
- 4 can make an instinctive decision as he arrives
- All 5 players can be very effective support players, going forward down a narrow channel

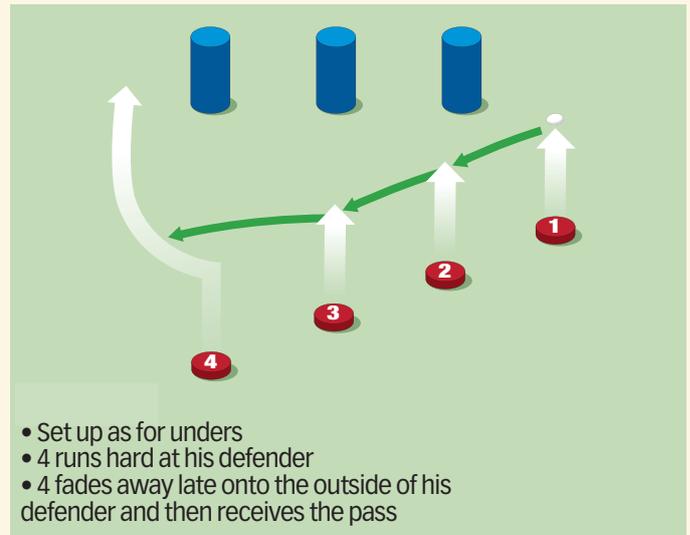
Practice B Attack close to the defensive line. Running unders and overs lines

Unders

- Use 3 stand-up tackle tubes
- 1, 2 and 3 stand square and run forward first
- 4 runs and holds his defender before running into the space, then receives the pass



Overs



Notes

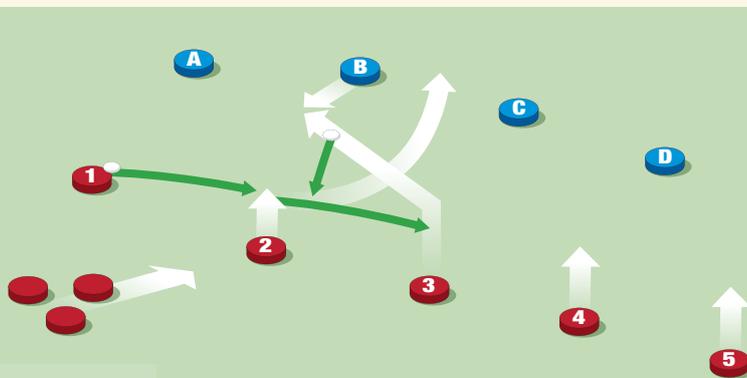
- Initially position the tackle tubes 3m apart
- Replace bags with players
- Keep rotating players – this is not a practice solely

for backs in a well-defended area. Forwards can run unders and overs lines effectively and run into space, not defenders

Practice C The loop

If the defensive line comes up quickly on the outside, the loop can be very effective

- 2 goes forward first to hold A
- 3 runs at B before angling in to receive the pass
- B moves in to cover run of 3, creating space for looping 2 to attack at pace with acceleration
- Support players around 1 have a more direct support line going forward



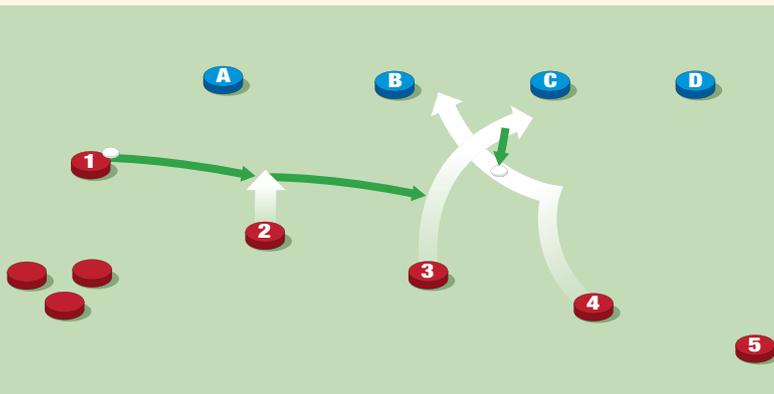
• Switches

Switches can be effective from set-piece attack and in phase play. The key is for the support player to stay outside the ball carrier until he's close to the defensive line. At the point of ball transfer, the support player may actually brush the shoulder of the ball carrier as he receives the ball and then straightens his run. Hence the ball is almost given rather than passed to the receiver.

When the inside defender thinks there is no threat of a switch, he may lose concentration and a space will appear between himself and his nearest defender. A late switch correctly performed can expose a lazy defender (*practice D*).

Practice D The switch

- 3 runs forward first
- 4 stays outside of 3 until last second, so B sees no threat
- 4 switches with 3, close to C



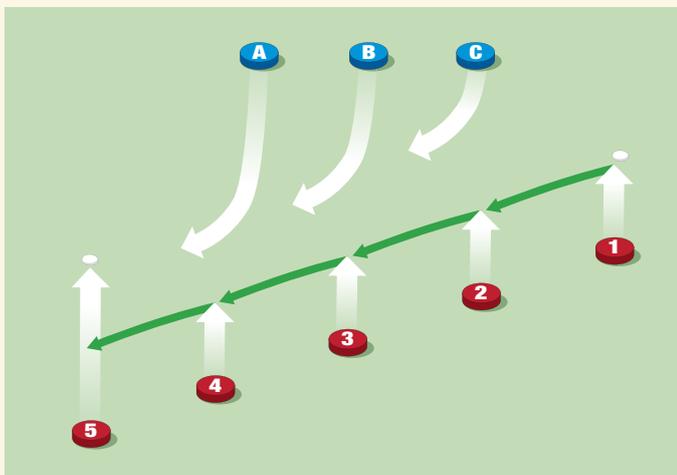
• Attacking the drift

Use any of the skills above to penetrate the defence (*see practice E*).

Practice E Attack the drift

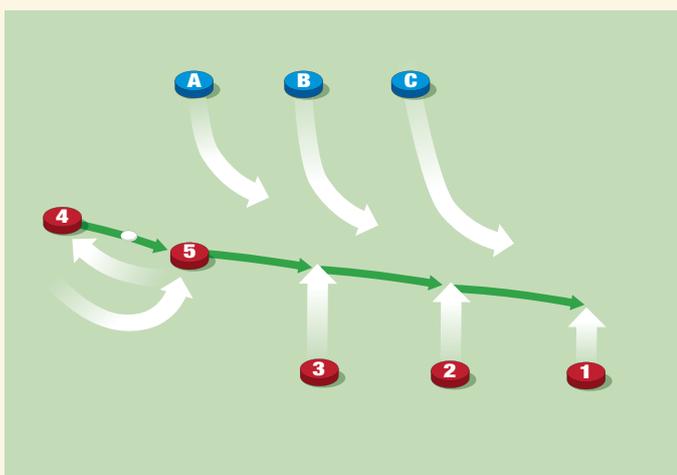
1st Phase: Right to left attack

- Three drift defenders go forward first to force the pass then move on to the next attacker
- Non-contact practice



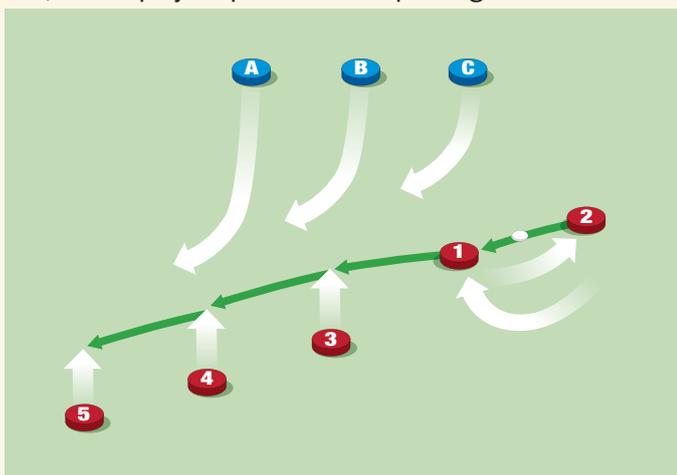
2nd Phase: Left to right attack

- Three drift defenders realign again on the inside shoulder of 5, 3 and 2
- Repeat as first phase



3rd Phase: Right to left attack

- Attackers can now attack the drift defence using one of loop, overs/unders run, switch play or quick accurate passing



Linking the skills

By combining these skills, our attack can become even more penetrative and difficult to contain. For example, try linking an unders runner to a looping player or the looping player fades away on an overs line to switch with the outside support runner.

Shaping the game

Give the game its shape back by going forward close to the tackle contest. If we do this, our attacking skills will be far more potent and easy to execute when we move the ball wider.

In order to produce entertaining and continuous play, we must create support lines that enable our support players to get more attackers to the tackle area than the opposition has defenders. Individual skill, when attached to the attacking skills above, will ask even more questions of the defence.

As a coach, I think we should always allow players time to work on their prize asset, whatever it may be. When individual skill and virtuosity is used in phase-play attack, the defender has little answer to it. For those coaches who like mind games, it's also psychologically damaging.

To this end, the "attack the drift" game scenario has many development options after the third phase. By adding extra attackers and defenders you'll be able to challenge your players even more to *go forward in attack*.

Coaching notes for practice E

- 1st and 2nd phase practices put pressure on the passing of the attack and the realignment of both attackers and defenders
- Insist on "go forward first" in attack and defence
- The defenders are passive in the first two phases
- On the 3rd phase, defenders can use two-handed touch on attackers
- Progress to full contact and continue to play from the tackle contest
- Rotate players around. You may find that the execution used in "attacking the drift" may identify a player with skills previously not shown
- You can continue to develop this practice by adding additional defenders and attackers on the 3rd phase after the contact

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Mike began his coaching career in the English Midlands and has coached both union and league. He coached Cambridge University RLC, England and GB international student RL, Sheffield Eagles RL and Nottingham RUFC.

He was Elite Player Development Coach at Leicester Tigers from 1999-2006 and joined the NSW Waratahs Academy coaching team in 2006. Mike was also Director of Coaching at Eastern Suburbs from 2007-10.

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